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ABSTRACT

Possible relationships among selected psychological, sociological, and economic characteristics of doctoral students were studied, and these characteristics were compared for students who completed or withdrew from Doctor of Education degree (Ed.D.) programs at West Virginia University. Questionnaires were mailed to 254 Ed.D. recipients and 287 nongraduates, with response rates of 82.98% and 63.40%, respectively. The graduates had received their doctorates between August 1977 and August 1984. Sixteen variables were significant in explaining completion or noncompletion of Ed.D. degrees. Findings indicate that Ed.D. recipients were more likely than nongraduates to have: spent more time in full-time study; decided on their major field of study before receiving the undergraduate degree; had a stronger commitment to their career; had a higher financial subsistence level; had different sources of financial subsidy, primarily assistantships; had more positive relationships with staff and other students; and had less difficulty with the dissertation. Additional variables that distinguish doctoral degree completers are identified, and 15 recommendations to increase retention are offered. 11 references. (SW)

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FACTORS RELATED TO ATTRITION FROM DOCTOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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FACTORS RELATED TO ATTRITION
FROM DOCTOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

This study investigated possible relationships among selected psychological, sociological and economic characteristics of doctoral students and compared these characteristics to the completion or noncompletion of Doctor of Education (Ed.D) degrees. A specifically designed questionnaire was mailed to 254 Ed.D. recipients and 287 nongraduates. The response rates were 82.98% and 63.40% respectively. Chi-square and t test statistical procedures were utilized to test for significant differences at the .05 level. Sixteen variables were significant in explaining completion or noncompletion of Ed.D. degrees, while 13 variables were not significant. As a result of the findings, 16 recommendations were made to faculty, administrators and doctoral students.

FACTORS RELATED TO ATTRITION FROM DOCTOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Statement of the Problem

A high rate of attrition from doctoral programs has been a significant problem in the field of education in the United States for many years (Berelson, 1960; Edwards, 1944). As early as 1944, doctoral attrition ranged from 16% to 78% in various institutions (Edwards, 1944). A study conducted by Allan Tucker (1964) found that the overall national average for attrition from doctoral programs was 38.1%. In another study of PhD programs in 10 major universities in the United States, Heiss (1970) found the drop out rate for doctoral students in top ranked institutions at 30%, and a rate of up to 50% in other institutions. At least 4 other researchers (Boozer, 1972; Carmichael, 1961; Cartter 1967; and Wright, 1964) found the attrition rate to be between 30% and 70% at various institutions. In addition, Sproull (1969/1970) found that doctoral attrition is more serious and particularly widespread in the field of education than in the arts and sciences.

Attrition from doctoral programs is a particularly important issue because of the uniqueness of doctoral students. In comparison to undergraduate and master's level students, doctoral students more often reflect the scholarly image of an institution and utilize more university resources, such as faculty time and energy, library facilities, and computer services. Therefore, practitioners in the field of education have long realized the loss of resources by students, faculty, and institutions, as a result of attrition from doctoral programs. In two national studies, Berelson (1960)

found that over one-half of the deans of graduate schools regarded attrition as an important problem in higher education, and Tucker (1964) reported that attrition at the doctoral level was looked upon as a waste of precious faculty time and a drain upon university resources already being used to capacity.

Tinto (1982) alluded to the financial implications of attrition. He viewed each withdrawal as a vacancy in the student body that might have been filled by someone who would have persisted. Thus, the attrition of individuals can cause serious financial strains upon the institution by undermining its continuing source of revenue.

Although many educators recognize attrition from doctoral programs as a problem, there seems to be very little research or information available in the United States concerning the qualitative aspects of doctoral students. There has been very little direct attention given to doctoral students by individual institutions. Hartnett and Katz (1977) believed:

> Because of the concentration of graduate schools on research, no one has particularly cared about student development. Or one might argue that because motivation and task-orientedness could be taken more for granted with graduate students than with undergraduates, there seemed to be no compelling need to pay much attention to graduate students. Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that very little attention has been given to the processes by which students become scholars and scientists and the environmental factors which help or hinder these processes.

A lack of information on the qualitative aspects of doctoral study, coupled with the problem of attrition from doctoral programs, supports the significance of this research. This study investigated relationships among some of the psychological, sociological, and economic characteristics of doctoral students and compared these characteristics to the students' completion or noncompletion of Doctor of Education degrees (EdD).

Methodology

A questionnaire, specifically designed for this study, was mailed to 254 EdD recipients and 287 nongraduates from the College of Human Resources and Education at West Virginia University in the United States. The questionnaire was designed to measure 31 null hypotheses. The graduates had received their doctorates between August 1977 and August 1984. The nongraduates had not enrolled in any classes at West Virginia University since 1983, or a time period of one year. Current addresses on the individuals were located through conversations with current faculty members, permanent record files at the university, Alumni Association lists, and telephone books of various geographic locations.

One week after the initial mailing, a postcard was sent to each participant. The card served as a reminder for those who had not yet responded, and as a "thank you" for those who had. A third mailing to those individuals who had not responded was planned. It was not needed, however, since responses from 84.65% of the graduates and 63.64% of the nongraduates were received after the postcard mailing.

The responses from the questionnaire were entered into the West Virginia University mainframe computer and analyzed by the Statistical

Analysis System (SAS) computer program. The data were first analyzed through straight tabulation and then converted into percentages.

To determine the statistical significance of the differences in the responses of the two groups, graduates and nongraduates, relative to the stated null hypotheses, a chi-square test was used on selected responses. This test was used because the data collected were expressed as frequencies rather than as measurements. For this study, the .05 level of significance was established as the criteria for rejection of all null hypotheses. For hypotheses on which adequate responses were not received in the cells to run a chi-square, the data were collapsed into 2 x 2 tables and then run as either chi-squares or exact probabilities.

To test significant differences in those hypotheses in which a mean could be calculated on the responses, a t test was used. The .05 level of significance was established as the criteria for rejection of all null hypotheses.

Findings and Conclusions

Results from the study indicate that EdD recipients were more likely than nongraduates to have: (a) spent more time in full-time study; (b) lived closer to the university during course work; (c) decided on their major field of study before receiving the undergraduate degree; (d) had a stronger commitment to their career; (e) had a higher financial subsistence level; (f) had different sources of financial subsidy, primarily assistantships; (g) had more positive relationships with faculty, other students, doctoral committees, faculty advisors, and doctoral committee chairs; (h) perceived course work to be of high quality and value; (i) had a better

orientation to academic expectations and support services from both departments and WVU sources; (j) had less difficulty with the dissertation; (k) perceived the value of the doctorate to be a definite asset in material and nonmaterial rewards; and, (l) resided in another state during their most formative years.

Variables which were not significant in explaining completion or noncompletion of EdD degrees were: (a) sex; (b) race; (c) marital status; (d) number of dependent children; (e) age when beginning or terminating the doctorate; (f) number of family members pursuing postsecondary education; (g) educational level of parents; (h) distance from the university during the dissertation; (i) physical and emotional health; (j) number of hours employed; (k) motive for beginning doctoral study; (l) second and third sources of financial subsidy; and, (m) student's perception of doctoral study when first enrolled.

Recommendations

1. Institutions should have in place, or develop, accurate systems for initially coding doctoral students into university data bases and a system for keeping their current status accurate.

2. The results strongly suggest that EdD recipients are more likely to be enrolled as full-time students rather than part-time, and are employed fewer hours than the unsuccessful students. In addition, the primary source of financial subsidy and the financial subsistence level are important factors in the completion or noncompletion of the EdD. Therefore, attempts should be made by the institution to provide for adequate financial assistance for doctoral students. Some possibilities include scholarships,

assistantships, university employment, stipends, low-interest or interest-free loans, grants, and research money for dissertations and research.

3. Faculty members need to be aware of the importance of developing genuine and positive personal relationships with the students and assisting them to become integrated into the departmental community and profession. Perhaps seminars for faculty members on interpersonal relationships would strengthen skills in this area.

4. Faculty members may want to consider a method by which effective interaction between themselves and doctoral students could take place. This dialogue should strive to promote and encourage an increased sensitivity to student needs by faculty; conversely, the students would have a better understanding of faculty expectations. Students could be encouraged to work with faculty members on publishing articles, presenting papers, or other professional activities.

5. Since personal relationships with faculty advisors are important, advisors should strengthen relationships with advisees, and show a genuine interest and concern for the student. Faculty advisors should consider making periodic personal contacts with advisees, particularly if the student has not attended classes, been on campus, or had any communication with the faculty for a semester.

6. Many times students must select advisors, doctoral committees, and dissertation chairs without really knowing the faculty members, and sometimes faculty advisors are randomly assigned to students. Since relationships with faculty members are very important, it may be useful for each department to develop ways in which a doctoral student could be matched with a major professor having compatible personalities, values, interests, and objectives.

7. Departments could consider identifying those professors who enjoy and appreciate the counseling role, are genuinely interested in students as individuals, and are competent to direct doctoral dissertations. Those professors could be given added advisory responsibilities and diminished teaching assignments, similar to those who have combined administrative and teaching duties.

8. Doctoral committees and, in particular, dissertation chairpersons need to be aware that they do influence the successful completion of the EdD. In working with doctoral students, committees and chairpersons should be: willing to give good, positive suggestions; reasonable and amendable to the student's ideas and suggestions; active and accessible; interested in the student as a person; helpful and encouraging; timely with feedback; and reasonable in their expectations.

9. Dissertation chairs and committees need to understand that students do have fears about the dissertation that prohibit them from completing the EdD. Dissertation chairs and committee members should make additional efforts to provide a great deal of guidance, encouragement, and support to students at the dissertation stage of the EdD.

10. Since relationships with other students in the department are important, each individual department should consider an organized system which would stimulate a positive interaction among doctoral students through support groups, study groups, and/or social situations. One method would be to introduce a more experienced student in the department to one just beginning a program. Students could also be encouraged to work together on projects or papers.

11. Faculty members and administrators should constantly evaluate and modify existing courses, course content, and teaching methods. Since

graduates perceived their course work as being intellectually stimulating, appropriate to their professional goals, self-directing with a great deal of freedom, and relevant, perhaps course evaluations should be designed to include evaluations of these criteria. Perhaps more emphasis should be given to soliciting evaluations from the nongraduates, in addition to the graduates.

12. Colleges may want to consider a strong counseling program and selection process for students who wish to pursue the EdD degree. In addition to the academic standards already being utilized for admission into an EdD program, faculty members should counsel with prospective candidates about the sociological and psychological deterrents to completing the degree. Faculty members should inform students that their chances of completing the EdD degree are greater if they: (a) live within 20 miles of the university during course work; (b) are definitely committed to their field; (c) decided on their major field of study before they completed their undergraduate degree; and, (d) perceive the doctorate as providing material or nonmaterial rewards.

13. It is recommended that graduate advisors make the results of this study available to prospective doctoral candidates so that they may evaluate their own qualifications and situations to optimize their chances for success.

14. The dissemination of information on academic requirements, support services, and the rights and privileges of doctoral students, needs to be a consideration by both the college and university. Perhaps departmental teams could be developed to provide indepth information concerning such things as financial aid, housing, job placement, program requirements,

identification cards, library and computer privileges, parking regulations, and privileges for athletic and cultural events. Another approach would be for individual faculty advisors to provide specified information to potential doctoral students on an individual basis. If this method is used, a standardized approach to orientation and the content of information should be agreed upon and followed by the faculty.

15. Faculty members and administrators need to be cognizant of the fact that a significant number of nongraduates hold negative attitudes toward faculty members, faculty advisors, dissertation chairs, dissertation committees, and other students. If faculty members are sensitive to this fact as they work with students, they may be more keenly aware of negative barriers developing.

Recommendations for Further Study

1. A faculty evaluation of doctoral students could be conducted in order to identify possible discrepancies between faculty and student expectations, in both academic and interpersonal areas. Further, a study of this nature could identify the faculty's perception of the needs of doctoral students to determine if they are congruent with the actual needs expressed by students.

2. Departments should consider a study of the perception graduates and, more importantly, nongraduates have of the value and quality of specific courses so that faculty members will have current data to use in program evaluations.

3. Studies could be conducted to measure the degree to which mentor relationships exist between faculty members and doctoral students. The

results of a study of this nature would provide additional information on how both doctoral students and faculty members perceive their relationships.

4. Studies on the interpersonal aspects of doctoral degrees would add a great deal of information to the limited knowledge that now exists. Some possible areas of exploration would be: the formation and group dynamics of dissertation committees, the interaction that takes place between advisor and advisee in selecting the dissertation topic, and personality factors in advisor-advisee relationships.

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NOTE: A 14 page bibliography is available upon request.